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David Fromkin

## THE GREAT GAME IN ASIA

**T**hroughout the nineteenth century, Great Britain was obsessed by the fear that one of the other European powers would take advantage of the political decay of Islamic Asia.

At first it was France. Then it was Russia that moved along the caravan routes of the old conquerors and threatened to establish a new world monarchy on the ruins of the ancient ones. British governments were worried by the implications of the continuing march southward by the Russian empire in Asia. In the early part of the century, the focus of strategic concern was Constantinople. Later, as czarist armies overran Central Asia, attention shifted to Persia, to Afghanistan and to the mountain passes of the Himalayas. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it was a common assumption in Europe that the next great war—the inevitable war—was going to be the final showdown between Britain and Russia.

The history of Russia's attempt to move into Afghanistan, Iran and other neighboring countries; of how Britain tried to stop Russia from doing so; and of how the war between the two of them did not take place, gains interest and possible significance from the American decision in our own time to contest Russian expansion on much the same battlefield.

### II

Supposedly it was a British officer who first called it the Great Game. He played it exuberantly, and lost it in the terrifying way in which one lost in Central Asia: an Uzbek emir cast him for two months into a well filled with vermin and reptiles, and then what remained of him was brought up and beheaded. The phrase “the Great Game” was found in his papers and quoted by a historian of the First Afghan War. Rudyard Kipling made it famous in *Kim*, and visualized it in terms of an Anglo-Indian boy and his Afghan mentor foiling Russian intrigues along the highways to Hindustan. These activities of the rival intelligence services are what some writers mean by the Great Game; others use the phrase in the broader sense in which it is used in this article to describe the whole of the Anglo-Russian quarrel about the fate of Asia.

The nature of that quarrel has been variously described. The Great Game arose from a complex of disagreements between Britain and Russia, and the weight to be assigned to each of the causes of the rivalry between them is still a subject of dispute among historians.

In the beginning, in 1791, when the British Prime Minister, William Pitt, opposed czarist annexation of Ochakov, a strategic port town belonging to the Ottoman Empire, it was for fear that Russia might become too powerful and might upset the existing balance of power. But for a long time thereafter, that fear was forgotten as Britain and Russia both fought for their lives against

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Napoleon. It was not until 1815, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, that British fears of Russia began to revive. At that time Russia appeared to be the strongest land power in the world. Ever since the reign of Peter the Great she had planned to become a great maritime power too. Foreign observers saw the military strength of Russia through a magnifying glass, and this exaggeration of Russian strength gave rise to exaggerated fears.

Perhaps the most unrealistic of these fears was that the Russians would march across Asia to attack the British position in India. Originally this had been Napoleon's idea. It was typical of his genius to see that the series of triumphs in the eighteenth century that had led Britain to establish her power on the far side of the world had brought with them a certain vulnerability, in that the British lines of communication and transportation had become long and thus especially subject to disruption. Although Napoleon succeeded in persuading the mad Czar Paul of Russia that he should swoop down across these lines to attack the British in India, it was not within the range of Russia's capabilities at that time to undertake such a campaign. Thus, Russia was not able to exploit Britain's vulnerability. The Russian armies pulled back when the Czar Paul died, and the road to India was not attacked. But Napoleon's conception was so vivid that decades later it sprang back to life in the minds of the British leaders who had defeated him.

It was odd that it should do so, because until then—with the abortive personal exception of Czar Paul—it seems never to have occurred to the rulers of either Russia or Britain that Russia's expansion southward in Asia bore any relation to British interests. The grand dukes of Moscow had begun their campaigns of expansion into Asia centuries before Britain had arrived in India, and the wars that they waged with such frequency against the empires and khanates of Asia would have taken place even if Britain had never existed. Moreover, even the frontiers across which the Russians marched in western and central Asia at the beginning of the nineteenth century were far distant from the Indian border.

The British did not take any particular interest at that time in the areas into which Russia was expanding. They neglected to study the geography and politics of Persia, Afghanistan or the Himalayas. As to western Asia, it was assumed that Russia would someday take over Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire, but the few people in Britain who thought about it were not alarmed by the prospect.

Indeed, until the wars of the French and American Revolutions, Russia was regarded by the British as their natural ally; and despite the several difficulties that arose between them in the years between 1789 and 1815, this was the opinion that most Britons seem to have held at least until the end of the Napoleonic wars.

It was only at the end of the 1820s, when Russia seemed to be abusing the prerogatives that flowed from her military strength by annexing substantial additional territories from the Ottoman and Persian Empires, that British leaders became sufficiently alarmed to view this continuing expansion south-eastward in Asia through Bonaparte's eyes. Books appeared in England discussing the Russian threat to India. In 1829 Wellington, then Prime Minister, corresponded with the President of the India Board about the invasion route the Russians might follow in the event that they planned to move into Afghanistan and from there to attack India.

From that time on, there always was a body of opinion in Britain that saw

in every Russian move in Asia a threat to Britain's interest in India, no matter how farfetched that might seem to be as an analysis of the motives behind the Russian move in question. Later, and especially after the Indian Mutiny, British leaders developed a related fear that the mere threat of a Russian attack would encourage the Indians to rise up and expel the British, whether a Russian attack actually ever materialized or not.

In 1830 Lord Palmerston became the British Foreign Secretary and began his long career as the shaper of British world policy. It is his name that is associated with the traditional British policy of upholding the territorial integrity of the Ottoman and other Islamic rulers in Asia against encroachment by any of the European powers—which in practice meant, by Russia. Thus Islamic Asia was called into service as a vast buffer against Russian expansion. Palmerston's chief object in doing so is said to have been his fear that if the Asian regimes collapsed, the struggle between the outside powers to pick up the valuable pieces would lead to a general and disastrous European war—the nineteenth-century equivalent of what today would be a world war, in that all of the great military powers of the time would have been drawn into it.

But there are other explanations, too, for Palmerston's policy. In 1832 Great Britain moved further in the direction of democracy, by enactment of a Reform Bill that somewhat enlarged the franchise; while Russia in the 1830s and 1840s, by her brutal repression of popular revolts in Poland, Hungary and elsewhere, moved further in the direction of establishing herself as the world's chief enemy of freedom. The ideological differences between the two countries became an increasing cause of friction between them. Britons in ever greater numbers came to object to Russia not merely for what she did but for what she was. The Russophobia soon outgrew the particular political differences between the two countries, and became a cause in its own right of Britain's determination to stop Russian expansion in Asia, despite Lord Palmerston's wise advice that Britain should have neither perpetual friends nor perpetual enemies. Historians have been at some pains to explain the genesis and development of this unique phenomenon; but whatever the explanation, it is undeniable that one of the real factors determining British policy throughout much of the nineteenth century was "an antipathy toward Russia which soon became the most pronounced and enduring element in the national outlook on the world abroad."<sup>1</sup>

Another factor that began to assume genuine significance was an economic one. In the beginning, a British presence was established in Islamic Asia for strategic national security reasons; but once that presence was established, patterns of trade began to develop modestly at first, but then more importantly. After the Anglo-Turkish Trade Treaty of 1838 and the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, trade with the Ottoman Empire in particular became a matter of major economic importance for Great Britain, and the Turkish market became Britain's third best customer in the world. Russia's designs on the Ottoman Empire thereupon became a threat to Britain's economic as well as her political interests. Moreover, while Turkey was an open market for British manufacturers, Russia had erected a high tariff barrier that excluded British goods, so that Russia became an enemy on free-trade grounds.

<sup>1</sup> John Howes Gleason, *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain: A Study of the Interaction of Policy and Opinion*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, p. 1.

Unarticulated was another point. The configuration of the southern sea-coast of Asia is such that narrow stretches of land and water can dominate and choke off traffic at quite a number of points so that Britain, as a sea power with worldwide interests, required that the whole of the coastline be held in friendly hands.

Russian efforts to take over Persia, with its seacoast, were therefore a threat to England's commerce and position in the world.

Britain, then, by the middle of the nineteenth century had at least nine reasons for opposing the continuing Russian expansion in Asia: (1) it would upset the balance of power by making Russia much stronger than the other European powers; (2) it would culminate in a Russian invasion of British India; (3) it would encourage India to revolt against Britain; (4) it would cause the Islamic regimes of Asia to collapse, which in turn would lead to the outbreak of a general war between the European powers in order to determine which of them would get what share of the valuable spoils; (5) it would strengthen a country and a regime that were the chief enemies of popular political freedom in the world; (6) it would strengthen a people whom Britons hated; (7) it threatened to disrupt the profitable British trade with Asia; (8) it would strengthen the sort of protectionist, closed economic society which free-trading Britain morally disapproved of; and (9) it would threaten the line of naval communications upon which Britain's commercial and political position in the world depended. To these the British Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister Lord Salisbury added a tenth toward the end of the century, when he observed that England would have to stop Russia from acquiring Constantinople because, having made such an issue of it for so long, England would lose her reputation as a formidable power if she finally yielded the point. An eleventh reason for British opposition to Russian expansion in Asia emerged only in the first part of the twentieth century, when it was discovered that there was oil in the areas that Russia threatened, and that the possession of oil was of considerable military and economic importance.

### III

Sometimes as a cold war and sometimes as a hot one, the struggle between Britain and Russia raged from one end of Asia to the other for almost a hundred years. From west to east on the map, the principal battlefields were the Ottoman Empire, the Persian Empire, the khanates of Turkestan in Central Asia, and the mountainous areas, such as Afghanistan, that stretch around the frontier of India.

In defense of the Ottoman Empire, Britain prevailed. She kept Constantinople and the Straits out of Russian hands; and in the Crimean War (1853–56) and at the Congress of Berlin (1878) Britain undid the results of Russian wartime successes against Turkey.

Britain was ineffective, however, in defending the Persian Empire. In decades of fighting in the first half of the nineteenth century, Russia conquered the Transcaucasus frontier and made final her annexations of Georgia, Circassia and parts of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Observing that Russia was more to be feared than was Britain, the Persian shahs fell under the influence of their czarist neighbor, and by the turn of the century Russian hegemony in Persia was almost complete. If the reason that Russia did not exploit the situation by establishing a position on the Persian Gulf coast was a fear of the

British reaction to such a move, it nonetheless can be said that Britain salvaged at least her minimum security needs from a losing situation.

And, in the last half of the nineteenth century Russia threw herself into the conquest of Central Asia: the khanates of Khiva, Bokhara and Kokand in western Turkestan, and the Turkoman tribal region then called Transcaspia. Britain did nothing other than protest.

Britain reacted violently, however, to any hint of Russian meddling in the areas on the frontier of India. In reaction to the presence of Russian agents there, Britain twice invaded Afghanistan, in the First Afghan War of 1838–42 and the Second Afghan War of 1878–80; and when Russia encouraged Persia to move against Afghanistan, Britain took decisive action—in 1838 and in the Anglo-Persian War of 1856–57. When Russian border patrols reached the Afghan frontier, in the Penjdeh crisis of 1885, Britain and Russia themselves nearly went to war.

At the end of the nineteenth century, it was discovered that there was another way in which Russia could get at Britain in Asia. Exploration teams reported that it would be possible to invade India through mountain passes in the region of the Pamirs, the “roof of the world.” Advancing over the high plateaus, the Russians got there first and claimed it as their own; and when a British expedition finally arrived to investigate, the Russians turned it back. Not long after the British and Russian governments reached an agreement in 1895 to compromise in this Pamirs crisis—the Russians kept the line of the frontier, but the British were given the mountain passes—information was received of further Russian intrigues in the high Himalayas, this time in Tibet, where the Dalai Lama sought to throw off the last vestiges of Chinese authority. The British government of India heard of contacts between the Russians and the Dalai Lama in 1900 and 1901, apparently made with a view toward offering Russian aid and establishing Russian influence. To counter these developments, the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, dispatched a British mission in 1903–04 which fought its way to Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, and, as the Dalai Lama fled, established British control.

What was so especially frightening about the Russian expansion in Central Asia was its persistence and seeming inevitability. The Russians were constantly fighting on their frontiers, against mountain and desert tribesmen if not against regular armies. Even in periods of nominal peace the fighting continued, as it did in the 1830s and 1840s in the Caucasus, where tens of thousands of czarist officers and troops received their firsthand schooling in warfare.

When they failed, they kept trying until they succeeded. In 1840 a Russian campaign to conquer Khiva met with disaster because Khiva was too far away and the logistical support of the expedition was inadequate to meet that challenge. The next time the Russians took great care in the preparation of their expedition; and on June 10, 1873, Khiva fell to them.

As each region was conquered, the Russians brought in logistical support, built roads and railroads, and organized themselves in such a way as to facilitate their going on to conquer the next adjoining territory. Even though this was not done in pursuance of some overall master plan for the conquest of Asia, to the outside world it bore the aspect of the carrying out of such a program.

Again and again, the Russians claimed that their military incursions were merely punitive expeditions, sent out to secure the frontier against attack; but



the territories into which the expeditions were sent were always annexed, and then themselves had to be defended by the sending of expeditions into the territories beyond them. The Russian government often claimed that these conquests were undertaken by overly ambitious Russian officers on the spot, in violation of orders from the czar and his ministers; and by and large, present-day Western historians accept the validity of these claims. Skeptics are in a position to point out, however, that the territories conquered in alleged violation of orders from St. Petersburg were never returned to their rulers, that the officers who supposedly violated orders were promoted, and that the officers who succeeded them in command continued to carry out the expansionist policies of which their government claimed to disapprove.

Perhaps the Russian advance would have seemed less menacing if it had taken place all at once. The conquest of Central Asia, for example, was a gradual encroachment over the course of many decades which must have seemed to contemporaries to be a series of separate conquests: a particular oasis occupied in one year, a certain city conquered the next year, a tribe of alleged marauders brought under control the year after that. Moreover the Russians seemed constantly to be pushing outward in all directions and to be prepared to keep on going until somebody stopped them.

There is another aspect to the situation, however, which the British Prime Minister Lord Melbourne pointed out in the 1830s when he was shown a map of Russian expansion and urged to take alarm at it. He said that "a map of England with her acquisitions during the same period would make a very respectable figure and colour no inconsiderable portion of the globe."<sup>2</sup> Viewed through distrustful eyes, the course of British expansion in Asia would indeed have been a cause for alarm.

How much this is so may be illustrated by a comment made long afterwards. On March 14, 1933, Jawaharlal Nehru, the future Prime Minister of India, wrote one of a series of letters outlining the history of the world for his teenaged daughter Indira, who grew up to become Prime Minister herself. In the letter in question, he discussed the traditional rivalry between Russia and England in Asia, and wrote that "the possession of India especially brought the British right up to the Russian frontier, and they were continually having nightmares as to what Tsarist Russia might do to India."<sup>3</sup>

In the nineteenth century Britain rounded out her position in India by the conquest of Sindh and other frontier areas, by the "forward policy" of conquering Afghanistan, and by the maintenance of a network of representatives and intelligence agents all across Asia. If the czar's government pictured these India-related activities as taking place on, in Nehru's words, "the Russian frontier," they were bound to see them as a dangerous series of acts of aggression. But the British government did not see them that way at all.

#### IV

What the British government did see—and the British public did not—was how Britain, in its struggle against Russia, could support the independence and territorial integrity of regimes such as the Ottoman and Persian Empires,

<sup>2</sup> Philip Ziegler, *Melbourne: A biography of William Lamb, 2nd Viscount Melbourne*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, p. 319.

<sup>3</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, New York: The John Day Company, 1942, p. 594.

which were cruel and unjust, denying their subjects even the most elementary of human rights. It was natural to wonder why Britain would risk war to keep in power rulers of whom all civilized persons must disapprove. Palmerston's enthusiastic response was to attempt to reform the regimes that Britain supported. It was an attempt that met with little success; and by the end of the century British leaders despaired of making any significant improvement in the governments of their Asian allies: if it could not be done in Turkey, Persia was not even worth trying, and the khanates were hopeless from the start.

A more traditional attitude, usually associated with the Tory Party and with the Foreign Office, was to consider the question of which foreign governments to support in the light of British interests rather than in the light of moral principles. If limited to the question of Asian policy at that time, this is a point of view with which it ought to be difficult to quarrel, for there was no effective alternative which British officials were aware of. Britain was obliged to deal with the governments that did or that might exist. That left her with a choice between deplorable allies and a deplorable adversary, a choice between evils, between a sultan who committed atrocities against Armenians and a czar who committed atrocities against Jews. Moral considerations were inapplicable in such a situation, and to introduce them into the discussion of foreign policy therefore was to mislead.

Yet there were many in Britain at that time—as there are in the United States today—who were not happy supporting a foreign policy not grounded in moral principle. The result was that a British political leader could not be sure that he would be able to rally enough domestic support to pursue a foreign policy that was in the best interest of his country.

For Russia, the introduction of the moral issue into foreign policy was a source of strength. She could use the rhetoric of liberation to justify her incursions into the territory of her neighbors, and not worry about the pull of her own domestic public opinion when she annexed or otherwise dominated the provinces that she then conquered, supposedly to free them, but in fact merely to bring them under her own rule.

Even abroad, the introduction of moral considerations into foreign policy issues worked against Great Britain. In 1907, when Britain settled her differences in the area by yielding most of inhabited Persia to Russia, the Persians attacked Britain but not Russia, for “tyranny was accepted from the Russians as natural to them, whereas Great Britain was expected to behave in accordance with her liberal traditions.”<sup>4</sup>

## V

The real issue was whether Britain could afford to preserve the Islamic regimes of Asia not in the moral sense but in the political and economic ones. The very qualities that made it so attractive to Britain to make a buffer zone of these decaying empires brought drawbacks. The empires made an ideal buffer zone because they were too feeble to threaten or to hurt the Great Powers; but that meant that they were also too feeble to defend themselves against Russian encroachments, and that Britain would have to do it for

<sup>4</sup> Sir Reader Bullard, *Britain and the Middle East, From Earliest Times to 1963*, London: Hutchinson University Library, 3rd rev. ed., 1964, p. 59.



them. Thus, they drained British resources rather than adding to them. By the last half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman and Persian Empires were not able to meet even the internal challenges to the viability of their governments, which became especially clear when the administration of their finances fell apart. Successive British cabinets failed to supply a solution to these problems and failed to persuade the governments in question to take their own remedial action.

The sultans of Turkey, in particular, knowing how much the British needed to prop them up, exploited that need in such a way as to avoid making the needed reforms. They felt free to resist the demands of foreign creditors and of foreign powers because they felt that Britain would be obliged to defend them against any attempts at enforcement. How to deal with this sort of blackmail by a weak client state is a problem that Britain was not able to solve in the nineteenth century any more than the United States has been able to do so in the twentieth century.

Especially frustrating was the case of Persia which at Russian instigation moved against British interests in protecting the integrity of Afghanistan. Britain thus was obliged to take military action against Persia, while at the same time trying to preserve the strength and integrity of Persia as against the Russians. To be forced to attack a country one intends to defend is a paradox—a paradox not unfamiliar to the government of the United States today as it attempts to decide how to deal with an Iran that has held Americans as hostages.

Another familiar aspect of that problem sprang from the rivalry of the countries Britain undertook to protect against Russia. The problem of how the United States should deal with the Greek-Turkish and Arab-Israeli conflicts, while at the same time shielding all of the countries in question against the Soviet Union, was foreshadowed by Britain's problem of what to do about Persian attacks against Afghanistan when both of them were countries she wanted to defend.

Attempts by Palmerston and other British leaders to persuade Persia that Russia was her real enemy fell on deaf ears. Whereas in Europe, if Russia had attacked and defeated several weaker countries, those countries would have banded together against Russia, the Asian regimes with which Britain was dealing at the time were too weak to be capable of any such response. In their world the weaker bowed to, instead of combining against, the stronger.

Yet if a country was willing to stand up for its independence against Russia, it also was likely to stand up against Britain, and the British therefore distrusted it. Such was the case of Afghanistan, against which Britain unwisely fought two wars in the nineteenth century and a third war in the twentieth century. These were dreadful, bloody debacles, and at some point in one of the disastrous retreats through the passes leading from Kabul to Jalalabad, some surviving British officer must have wondered whether it would not have been a better thing if it were a Russian army that the fierce Afghani were allowed to hack to pieces rather than a British one. Indeed, the young Disraeli had pointed out after the First Afghan War that Afghanistan could provide the finest possible barrier against Russian invasion if only Britain would stop interfering in its affairs.

The moral of this seems to be that it is best to leave to a local power the responsibility for defending both its interests and one's own. It is, of course, a defect of this policy of acting through regional surrogates—such a policy as

was adopted for the United States by President Nixon and Henry Kissinger in the 1969–73 Administration—that a power strong enough to act in such a capacity is likely to have ambitions of its own. The effective alliance that Britain finally contracted in order to defeat Russia in Asia was the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902, which freed the Japanese to fight the Russo-Japanese War of 1904. In the short run this was a success for Britain, in that Japan destroyed Russian power in the Pacific; but then, some decades later, Japan also went on to destroy in the Pacific the power and presence of Great Britain.

To the mind of so skeptical and clear-sighted a statesman as Lord Salisbury, the most reliable policy for England was one that she could carry out herself without having to rely on others. Some of the strategic elements necessary for doing so were either available or already in place. In 1798 Nelson had won control of the eastern Mediterranean for the British navy; and in that same year the first of a series of agreements was negotiated between Britain and the local rulers along the Persian Gulf coast which, during the nineteenth century, assumed the form of a virtual British protectorate of the entire coastal route to India. Partly by accident and partly by design, Britain also ended up occupying Egypt and the Suez Canal. In order to further his plan for Britain to take her fate into her own hands, Salisbury also obtained Cyprus from Turkey, explaining that it was in Turkey's own interest that British forces should have the use of a location of such strategic importance.

But Salisbury's hopes were dashed when it proved impossible to have British officials take charge of the administration and obtain a sort of protectorate over the Ottoman Empire. It was the 1880 elections, bringing Gladstone back into power, that, in Salisbury's view, destroyed the possibility of accomplishing such a program. Gladstone, who was on record as believing that the Turks were antihuman, washed his hands of the Ottoman involvement. The Turks, unable to stand on their own, turned to the new power of Bismarck's Germany as their protector. When Salisbury resumed his tenure of the Foreign Office in 1885, he lamented that the change could not be undone. Gladstone's government had given away the British influence at Constantinople—"They have just thrown it away into the sea," he exclaimed, "without getting anything whatever in exchange."<sup>5</sup>

What this meant was that while British interests still required that Russian expansion be stopped on the Ottoman and Persian frontiers, London was not able to guide Ottoman and Persian rulers so that they would take effective measures to ensure their own survival, in their own interest and in Britain's. In large measure, then, by the end of the nineteenth century Great Britain had lost control of the elements upon which her destiny as a power in Asia depended. If, for example, Russia were to descend from the interior of Asia upon the Persian coast, it was not clear how Britain, with only her fleet, could counterattack.

Lord Curzon, having become Viceroy of India, made a show of strength by a naval tour of the Persian Gulf coast. Lord Lansdowne, then Foreign Secretary, warned off Britain's adversaries by proclaiming in 1903 that "we should regard the establishment of a naval base or of a fortified post on the Persian Gulf by any other power as a very grave menace to our interests and

<sup>5</sup> Lady Gwendolen Cecil, *Life of Robert Marquis of Salisbury*, London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1921 Vol. II, p. 326.

we should certainly resist it with all the means at our disposal.”<sup>6</sup> President Jimmy Carter recently made a remarkably similar pronouncement about the Persian Gulf; and then as now, the question raised by such a pronouncement is that of what substantive strength lies behind the warning.

For Britain, a naval power whose homeland was far from Asia, the question was where and how she could bring her own particular strength to bear upon an adversary moving out from the interior of the great Eurasian land mass. In a more general sense, the question was how to bring British political objectives in line with the resources and strategies that were available to accomplish them.

## VI

At the beginning of the Anglo-Russian rivalry, after the Napoleonic Wars, it appeared that England and Russia were the two remaining Great Powers in the world, but that they were powers of a completely different kind. Britain was something new, as the greatest maritime and commercial power the world had ever seen. Russia appeared as a giant empire of the traditional type with a land army that overshadowed all other land armies in the world. It was not entirely clear how the two countries could get at one another, unless the British landed or the Russians put out to sea. The leaders of Great Britain never really came to grips with the fact that British power was inadequate in kind as well as scale to accomplish many of the strategic objectives that Britain had set herself. If Russia had been as militarily effective as she was believed to be, there would have been no way for mere wealth and a fleet to have stopped the czarist armies in the interior of Eurasia.

The wealthy British had subsidized their continental allies to do much of their land fighting for them in the Napoleonic and other European wars, but the rotting Islamic empires that were their allies in Asia lacked the fighting power to do the job. Moreover, for London to incite them into fighting losing campaigns from which Britain had no ground forces to extricate them would weaken rather than strengthen the British cause. Indeed when Britain failed to defend Persia in the Russo-Persian War of 1826–28—a course of inaction which Britain was fully justified in taking because Persia had started the war and the 1814 mutual defense agreement obligated Britain to defend Persia only against aggression—the Shah concluded that Britain was an unreliable ally, and in effect he went over to the Russian side.

Although Britain’s economic strength was great, competitors existed, and by the second half of the nineteenth century France, Italy and Germany were able in large part to supplant her in the financial and commercial life of the Islamic world. However, Britain did maintain a network of representatives and intelligence agents all across Asia; and because the Russians were not as strong as they were thought to be, this network was able to play a role in helping to deter or stop the Russian advance.

The point at which it was believed that Britain could exercise maximum pressure was Constantinople. From there her warships could enter the Black Sea and with impunity bombard the coast of the Crimea, as was done in the Crimean War. However, if the Russian forces then withdrew from the coast

<sup>6</sup> Bullard, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

into the interior, there was little that Britain could do; she could land troops on the shore as an invasion force, but there was no reason to suppose that a small expeditionary force of this sort could conquer the vast land mass of Russia when even the great Napoleon with all his forces could not do so. Fortunately for the British and for their French allies, the Russians obliged them by not retreating when the Crimean War invasion took place, thus allowing the allied powers, despite their own abysmal military performance, to inflict a shattering defeat on the Russian Army.

It was only Russia's strategic blundering that had made victory in the Crimean War possible; and England's leaders ought to have seen that, unless against all odds such blunders were repeated, it would be difficult if not impossible to project Britain's power into the areas where Britain proposed to contain Russian expansionism. As Lord Salisbury said in another context, it was not possible for the British Navy to sail over the Taurus mountain range.

The brilliant success of Salisbury's diplomacy kept his countrymen from following this line of reasoning to its logical conclusion. In the war-fevered year of 1878, as Britons whipped up their martial enthusiasm with the Jingo song in their music halls, Salisbury won Britain's greatest victory at the Congress of Berlin by the sheer force of his intellect. As A.J.P. Taylor has written, "Great Britain won a bloodless victory with a music-hall song, a navy of museum pieces, and no land forces at all. . . . Moreover, she won without a reliable continental ally. . . . The resounding achievement of 1878 weakened the effectiveness of British policy in the long run; for it led the British public to believe that they could play a great role without expense or exertion—without reforming their navy, without creating an army, without finding an ally."<sup>7</sup>

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Britons were shown that it was not possible to run a successful foreign policy on the cheap. The chief powers of Europe had formed themselves into rival blocs that excluded and were to a certain extent directed against England. The Boer War had exposed the weakness of Britain's military resources and her lack of preparedness. Russian railroad construction in Asia had come close enough to India so that the threat of invasion finally became plausible. In a seminal essay, Sir Halford Mackinder, the prophet of geopolitics, outlined the implications of some of the changes that had occurred in the world. The development of the railroad and other means of rapid land transportation, he wrote, had transformed the relationship between sea power and land power. Formerly it was a navy that made a country's armed forces mobile. Now the speed of railroads gave the advantage to land powers operating on interior lines, for they were able to concentrate their forces by sending them rapidly along the straight line which constitutes the shortest distance between two points, while a seagoing adversary must sail all around the circumference and arrive at the field of combat too late. Mackinder taught his followers to look at the map with new eyes and thus to see that Russia occupies the pivot area controlling the Eurasian continent, where most of mankind lives, and that this pivot area was inaccessible to Britain's kind of power. It was a gloomy message that he preached: in effect he said that Britain had placed her bet on yesterday while Russia had placed hers on tomorrow.

<sup>7</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954, p. 250.

Britain was saved from the necessity of having to invent a new strategy to support her nineteenth century objectives because new developments obliged her to abandon most of these objectives. The rise of new powers—Japan, Germany and the United States—transformed the structure of world politics, making what had been a bipolar world into a multipolar one. In this new world England, her weakness exposed by the Boer War, and Russia, her weakness exposed by the Russo-Japanese War and by the Revolution of 1905, no longer appeared to be threats to one another. As Walter Bagehot wrote, the fear of Russia was an idea that belonged to “the pre-Germanic age.”<sup>8</sup> It was Germany that Britain had to fear now, and that Russia had to fear as well.

In 1907 Britain and Russia entered into a treaty that composed their differences in Asia. Tibet was neutralized; Russia abandoned her interest in Afghanistan and left control of its external policy to Britain; and Persia was divided into three zones, with Russia taking over the substance of the country and England its seacoast. Most historians use the same phrase in describing the effect of this treaty. They write that the Game was over.

But it is not entirely true. The Russians went beyond what was allowed under the Persian terms of the treaty—British officials claimed they were not reporting all of the treaty violations to their own people, for fear of the effect on the necessary Anglo-Russian alliance against Germany. After the Russian Revolution, Russia disappeared from the areas in contention for about four decades, so that her willingness to abide by the other terms of the 1907 agreement was not put to the test. By the time that the Soviet Union appeared on the scene, the British already were packing to go home, so that again the matter was not put to the test. The United States has now taken over, in large part, the British position in terms of influence and interest in the Middle East and southern Asia, and the question of ultimate Russian intentions in that area of the world is still unresolved.

## VII

It has often been complained that Russian political intentions are difficult to fathom because of the closed nature of her society. As a seventeenth century British visitor to Russia remarked, “Such is the disposition of the Russes that they will not indure to have the secrets of their state bee made knowne.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, even when the private communications of Russian government leaders are made known, as were those of some of the czarist ministers after the Bolshevik revolution, it is more difficult than it is with most countries for foreign observers to judge how much weight should be assigned to the advice of particular ministers.

Nonetheless, Western historians in the past half-century seem to have established that the Russian government did not harbor many of the wilder ambitions that were ascribed to them during the nineteenth century. They tend to believe that, as against the British, Russian policy in Asia was essentially defensive. It is thought that when Russia put pressure on Britain in such sensitive areas as Afghanistan, the Pamirs and Tibet, it was to keep the British from attacking the Russians once again in the Black Sea. “To keep

<sup>8</sup> Walter Bagehot, *The Collected Works*, London: The Economist, 1974, Vol. 8, p. 306.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Purchas, quoted in M.S. Anderson, *Britain's Discovery of Russia, 1553-1815*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1958, p. 41.



England quiet in Europe by keeping her employed in Asia; that, briefly put, is the sum and substance of Russian policy," wrote George Curzon nearly a century ago, in words that historians quote with approval.<sup>10</sup> The British fear that the Russians intended an invasion of India is dismissed as a baseless nightmare, which the Russians from time to time took advantage of in order, again, to distract the British from attacking them in Europe.

At the beginning of the Great Game, British fears of an attack on India were certainly unwarranted. Russia at that time lacked the financial resources, the transportation facilities, the ability to develop supply routes and even the maps, through hitherto uncharted sections of Central Asia, that a successful invasion of India would require. Later, after Russia had developed some of these capabilities, it still was not clear why Russia would want to invade British India except to counterbalance a British move against Russia in some other part of the world. British fears, in this respect, then, were irrational. The obsessive nature of these fears is suggested by a prediction that one of the leading English statesman of the twentieth century made about the politics of the twenty-first century: in a book published in 1930, Lord Birkenhead predicted that in 2030 A.D. India would still form an integral part of the British Empire, but that Russian agents still would be scheming to subvert that rule and to win India for Russia.<sup>11</sup>

Western historians who have exposed the extent to which the leaders of both powers were motivated by unrealistic fears have been able to provide an explanation of the rivalry between Britain and Russia in terms of mutual misunderstanding. According to one of the most recent and brilliant studies of the period by a British historian, "It is apparent now that the lasting hostility between Britain and Russia was based on a quite unreal fear in each of the other's supposed aggressive intentions."<sup>12</sup> This is an elegant explanation, and one that would have provided a text upon which an eighteenth century philosophical ironist might have amplified to preach the folly of human political behavior. For ourselves it might well provide a useful reminder of how often Russian strength has been exaggerated and Russian intentions misunderstood; and of how much of the time Russia acts out of mistaken fear of our intentions rather than out of aggressive intentions of her own that are directed against us.

But while this provides an explanation of the Great Game which is in some respects true, it is not the whole truth. Russia may not have intended to engage in expansionism as against England. Undeniably, however, the czarist empire engaged in expansionism as against the Islamic Asian regimes on the Russian frontier—and intended to do so. On a regular basis Russian forces prepared to invade these neighboring areas, did invade them, conquered them, and annexed them. By definition this is expansionism. And in the context of nineteenth century opinion this was not a policy for which the Russians necessarily had to apologize.

New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United States were frequently cited as examples of successful expansionism that served the cause of civiliza-

<sup>10</sup> George N. Curzon, *Russia in Central Asia in 1889 and the Anglo-Russian Question*, London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1967, p. 321.

<sup>11</sup> F.E. Smith, Lord Birkenhead, cited in I.F. Clarke, *The Pattern of Expectation, 1644–2001*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1979, p. 242.

<sup>12</sup> G.D. Clayton, *Britain and the Eastern Question: Missolonghi to Gallipoli*, London: University of London Press, Ltd., 1971, p. 126.

tion. As Theodore Roosevelt wrote at the end of the nineteenth century, in a passage not untypical of the views held by many Americans and Europeans at that time:

The most ultimately righteous of all wars is a war with savages, though it is apt to be also the most terrible and inhuman. The rude, fierce settler who drove the savage from the land has all civilized mankind under a debt to him. American and Indian, Boer and Zulu, Cossack and Tartar, New Zealander and Maori—in each case the victor, horrible though many of his deeds are, has laid deep the foundations for the future greatness of a mighty people. . . . it is of incalculable importance that America, Australia and Siberia should pass out of the hands of their red, black and yellow aboriginal owners, and become the heritage of the dominant world races.<sup>13</sup>

For the United States to conquer or occupy everything in its way, until it had filled out a continent and created a commonwealth that stretched from one ocean to the other, was a national destiny that seemed manifest. There was no reason for the Russians to think that their destiny was any less clear.

The Russian Imperial Chancellor, Prince Gorchakov, set out his country's aims and objects in 1864 in terms that were not dissimilar to those used by British and American leaders with respect to their own objectives. He argued that the need for secure frontiers obliged the Russians to go on devouring the rotting regimes to their south. He pointed out that "the United States in America, France in Algiers, Holland in her colonies—all have been drawn into a course where ambition plays a smaller role than imperious necessity, and the greatest difficulty is knowing where to stop."<sup>14</sup>

What was clear was that the Russians were not going to stop of their own accord anywhere near their then existing frontiers. In 1828 a high British official wrote of the Russians in Persia, Armenia and Mesopotamia that "they will be compelled, as we were in India, to make new conquests to secure those they have already made."<sup>15</sup> A half century later, the author of a classic American travel book about the then-recent Russian conquests in Turkestan wrote that "as far as one can foresee, Russia will be compelled in the future to advance still further."<sup>16</sup> A decade and a half later, after Russia had made further conquests in Central Asia, George Curzon visited the region and was convinced that the czarist advance had to continue, and that Russia was "as much compelled to go forward as the earth is to go round the sun. . . ."<sup>17</sup> Not even Soviet historians, who have access to the czarist archives, claim that czarist expansion in Asia was undertaken for the purpose of thwarting Britain. It had begun before the British came to Asia, and would have continued whether the British had arrived or not.

Had Britain not acted against the threat of Russian expansion, it is possible that internal weaknesses would have inhibited the growth of the Russian empire anyway. It is not possible to prove whether that would have been true or not. But no responsible British statesman, even had he been fully aware of

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1979, p. 464.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Swinton, *North-West Frontier: People and Events, 1839–1947*, London: Hutchinson, 1967, p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Lord Ellenborough, President of the India Board, citing the views of Sir J. Malcolm. J.A. Norris, *The First Afghan War, 1838–1842*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1967, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Eugene Schuyler, *Turkistan*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966, p. 284.

<sup>17</sup> Curzon, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

the true extent of Russian weakness, could have gambled that such weakness alone would prove sufficient to halt the Russian advance.

If one assumes that Russia would have consolidated her hold on all of those areas in which she endeavored to assert her influence had not Britain presented her from doing so, it was a formidable empire indeed that the English kept from being created. On the basis of such an assumption it can be said that, had it not been for British opposition, Russia in substance and perhaps in form would have taken all of Persia, including its coastline. Whether and where Russia would have chosen to stop in annexing other coastal areas along the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean is a matter for speculation. Mesopotamia, Afghanistan and Tibet would have come into the Russian sphere of influence, even if they were not formally annexed into the Russian empire. Constantinople and the Straits would have fallen into Russian hands, though the fate of other Ottoman lands, such as Arabia and Syria, would have been less easy to discern.

Such an expansion of the Russian empire by its very nature would have endangered the British world position, whether or not the Czar and his ministers intended that it do so. A Russian empire that stretched from the Balkans and the Mediterranean on the west to the Pacific on the east, and that stretched so far that its next neighbor on the north was the Arctic and, on the south, Antarctica, would have overshadowed the countries of Europe to such an extent that the balance of power would surely have been overthrown. From the British point of view, therefore, the dangers to which Russian expansionism gave rise were real ones; and England was right to seek to contain the Russian advance.

From the Russian point of view, the British threat was equally real. The British opposed them everywhere, created alliances against them, and, in the Crimean War, invaded them. Whereas it was not true that Russian expansion was directed against Britain (for Russia was merely conquering neighboring areas that she coveted), British expansion most definitely was directed against Russia. Britain did not covet for herself territories such as Afghanistan—into which she intruded herself and that she defended against Russia—nor did she take any great interest in them for their own sake; for as Lord Salisbury wrote, “nobody pretends that it matters to us whether they are held by Hottentots or Esquimaux.”<sup>18</sup> All that Britain cared about was that Russia did not get them.

Canadians and Australians were allowed to fill out their continents from ocean to ocean. The United States was allowed to do it; no European power took a stand on the Mississippi, claiming that if the Americans went on, they would make themselves the most powerful country in the world, and that such a development had at all costs to be prevented. Only the Russians, in Asia, were singled out. And it was not irrational of them to fear the designs of Great Britain, which had deliberately placed herself between the advancing Russian armies and the warm seacoasts of the south. Russians had said that it was their historic destiny to reach the Indian Ocean, but Britain had prevented them from achieving it.

The Great Game in Asia, then, was played for real stakes, and not merely for the imaginary ones—the unjustified fears and mutual misunderstandings upon which historians nowadays tend to focus. Of the many causes of the

<sup>18</sup> Lady Gwendolen Cecil, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

Anglo-Russian rivalry, some were irrational and some lapsed with time and circumstance, but the initial cause, suggested by Pitt in 1791, remained valid as long as the Game was played—the danger that Russian expansion would overthrow the balance of power and result in czarist domination of Eurasia if not the entire planet. Queen Victoria claimed that “it is a question of Russian or British supremacy in the world”.<sup>19</sup> That may be too simple a way of putting it, but it is not very far from the truth.

<sup>19</sup> Clayton, *op. cit.*, p. 139.